MISSION AND MORTAR
May 18, 1995
5:30 p.m.
"Amazing Space: Chicago's Churches and Synagogues"
Inspired Partnerships/Chicago Architecture Foundation
Presentation
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I wish to thank Inspired Partnerships for the very important work you are doing and for this event, "Amazing Spaces, Chicago's Churches & Synagogues."

Inspired Partnerships is addressing a fundamental challenge, which is becoming a crisis - how to maintain our wonderful spaces? For us there are deeper problems, i.e., *should* we use shrinking church resources to maintain buildings?

That discussion sets off a predictable debate between Progressive and Conservative, Innovators and Traditionalists, and sometimes an unhealthy confrontation between ecclesiastical "haves" and "have-nots."

Your work helps break that up and forces us to think anew. Should we spend money on mission or mortar? The answer clearly is "yes."

It is a question about which we thought a lot at Fourth Presbyterian Church recently. We are not typical -- our people are still with us and form a base from which we offer programs and mission which generate interest. The neighborhood transitions on North Michigan Avenue have increased population density and economic strength.

Nevertheless, we've wrestled with the basic question -- shall we invest heavily in our building? The institutional church is often accused of having an edifice complex -- particularly churches with grand buildings like ours.

Our architect, indeed, "made no small plans", and was never altogether happy, I conclude, to be working for Presbyterians. Ralph Adams Cram, I suspect, preferred the notion of empire -- and gave us a lovely, but stunningly unPresbyterian assembly of thrones, mitered bishops, and coats of arms which we love aesthetically but, theologically, take with a grain of salt.

In a sense, the issue has always been important at Fourth Presbyterian Church. On May 12, 1914, at the dedication of the new building, the Chairman of the Building Committee, Thomas Jones, addressed the congregation. He said some very important things. I keep one paragraph of his speech close at hand for easy reference. Mr. Jones said:

> "Whether the expenditure which has been made here ... shall prove justified, time alone can answer. And the answer will be in terms of service, the lives lived here, and the spirit that shall go out from here and enter into the life of the community ... and yet there is within us a deep hope that these structures, these walls, may have a silent ministration of their own ... We trust that not only members but passerby may be moved to enter and ... find ... and awakened sense of reverence of the presence and power of the Unseen."

The current leadership of Fourth Presbyterian Church made a decision, not unlike the decision Mr. Jones and his committee made when they purchases a lot on the northern extension of Pine Street, called Lincoln Parkway, at Delaware Place. We decided to recommit ourselves, and our successors, to our neighborhood.

We often muse about how skeptical some must have been about that original decision -- the neighborhood wasn't much, rooming houses, warehouses. What is now Michigan Avenue was an unpaved road and there was no bridge over the river on Pine Street. On the site where the minister's home was built, The Manse, stood a lively tavern: M. Donoghue's North Shore Sample Room. And then they hired the best architect they could find to build a gothic cathedral.

We decided to stay put and reinvest in our building as a way of reinvesting in our neighborhood and city. Contrary to rumor heard around the neighborhood several years ago, there has never been any consideration given to the possibility of our moving. We did learn about the power of rumor, however, when shortly after a television news broadcast included a clip of a local preservationist standing in our courtyard pointing to our building and solemnly observing that it would be a tragedy if this church should succumb to the wrecking ball, shortly thereafter, we heard the tour director on one of the double-decker buses announce to his customers as they passed by -- "On your right is the Fourth Presbyterian Church -- soon to be leveled to make room for a highrise" -- *we are not moving!*

Why the investment? Why spend all that money? Part of the answer is that the building needed it. The sanctuary was tired. Serious deterioration has begun around the ceiling canvasses. Water leaks over the years had eroded the stone, and from the start the lighting wasn't very good. There was an intentional compromise in acoustics which favored the preachers over the musicians. Leaded windows were sagging and were filthy, pews were cracking, and there were 50 layers of wax on the terra cotta floor.

The rest of the building functioned -- well as a 1914 church facility, complete with separate entrances for mens and ladies'club rooms. An educational addition was designed on the realities and assumptions of the past, namely that religious education has little to do with worship, therefore the same people would not be using both facilities in the same morning. It never occurred to Mr. Cram and his associates that someone might bring a baby to church on Sunday, nor that anyone in a wheelchair might attend. We had five or six levels depending on how many times you had to go outside to get from one place to another.

We needed a new church, inside, without disturbing the exterior and that is what we are creating. That's part of the answer. Another part is that we respectfully conclude that cities need churches: our neighborhood needs us.

In a wonderful book, "American Churches", Roger Kennedy, former director of the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian says,

> "God is the mystery behind all mysteries. How foolish to think that any one form of building could be appropriate to all God's aspects:"

Why have religious buildings at all?, some might ask. Mr. Kennedy responds:

> ... because among our needs is to seek the mystery and to associate with others in that search: [P.19.] Or as Mr. Jones put it in 1914; "We trust that not only members but passerbys may be moved to enter and ... find ... an awakened sense of the presence and power of the Unseen."

I think we are a sign to our neighbors of that; a symbol, dwarfed by the 900 building, the John Hancock Center, Water Tower Place, that there is reality which is not circumscribed, or even approached, by those massive symbols of human power and presence any more than the tower of Babel was.

Interestingly, our spacial relationship to our neighbors has inverted. Once we towered, as the Cathedrals tower over the towns of Salisbury and Canterbury. But now, from the top of the John Hancock we are tiny, a delicate jewel, dwarfed by its powerful neighbor.

Yet the reminder is perhaps more relevant, more eloquent, than ever.

> "There is more than this", Cram's building says. "There is more to our humanity, our human community, our human potential and destiny than this."
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> "Thou hast made us restless until we find our rest in thee." St. Augustine wrote 1500 years ago; "to seek the mystery and to associate with others in that search," the historian suggested. "to awaken a sense of reverence to the power and presence of the unseen; the Building Committee Chair echoed.

The third part of the answer is what the building does;

> "Whether the expenditure which has been made here ... shall prove justified ... will be answered in terms of service, the lives lived, and the spirit that goes out with the life of the community."

From the beginning, churches, at their best, have lived for their communities. At our best, it is our defining characteristics, and when we forget it; when our purpose is ourselves: our adornment, beautification, maintenance, or even our preservation, we become something less than the church, and although something of the facade may continue for a very long time, the church has, in fact, died.

And so we have tried to be very clear. We are building for a future that carefully balances our needs as a community of faith for education, worship and fellowship space, but also our responsibility to serve our city.

The process actually began as the church took a long and thoughtful look at itself 12 years ago, as the distinguished career of my predecessor, Elam Davies, was coming to its conclusion.

The church did a self-study and evaluated itself against its identified goals and objectives. It asked its neighbors for their opinion. It asked the city what it needed from the church. It did basic market research, not in a philosophic vacuum, but in the context of its primary and only purpose: to be a faithful Presbyterian Church.

That careful process reaffirmed the key to Fourth Presbyterian Church's long and strong presence: that everything else about the church, including its professional staff and its building serves its mission. That mission, historically, has had two foci, both equal: the congregation and the city, the world.

And so, the leaders concluded, our plans for the future ought to be made always in the light of that -- and if the church ever wanted to grow, it would need to remember that its primary identity and source of strength is its mission.

That's not necessarily a traditional approach to church growth. Normally, you might try methods to induce people to join: better marketing, more aggressive sales. We decided to provide more opportunities for service: to make sure we did the other as well: did our homework on communicating our basic messages. But to try to expand the opportunities for mission.

So we expanded our Tutoring Program until it began to burst at the seams. And we got involved in Homeless Ministries: helping to begin a shelter at the Christian Industrial League, building homes with Habitat for Humanity, Cooking for the Homeless on Sunday evenings and opening the church for Sunday Night Suppers.

We sent people to Mexico, Nicaragua, and Northern Ireland, launched an AIDS ministry, held Michigan Avenue Forums on topics of community concern, and made our Arts Festival more visible, dramatic, and sometimes controversial by commissioning artists to wrap our trees, display modern sculptures in our Garth, and invited David Brubeck to play jazz and Paul Winter to accompany the music of whales and wolves in our sanctuary. And we added opportunities for worship and study.

Part of what we have done in ten years is watch the congregation grow at a time of very significant decline for mainline churches. When it came time to look at our facilities, again, we led with our mission: "What we need in order to be the kind of institution we intend to be." Or in our vocabulary, what God calls us to be.

So when we finished restoring our worship space which more than anything else defines who we are, we turned our attention to mission.

We will have a Tutoring Center, space specifically designed to accommodate 500 youngsters and their tutors, on 3 evenings per week.
It will include a Computer Center, which is already one of the many creative and popular aspects of the program. We will have new space for community meetings. Something like 40 community groups use our building: 12-step groups from AA, to Al Anon, to "Why Me? Breast Cancer" to incest survivors, to mixed race families. We will have space for large gatherings and small gatherings. We will be accessible to wheelchairs and friendlier to all of us who are less and less sure we can see the steps we are descending.

And we will open a new Day Care Center in the Fall. In addition to our fine Day School, the new Fourth Presbyterian Church Children's Center, a full Day Care Program will serve about 50 children in a clean, safe, loving environment close to the workplace for families that need us.

And significantly, as we went to our members to find the money to pay for this, we committed ourselves to give away the first million dollars we raised.

We are doing that: contributing to the work of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) here and abroad, and specifically to two local projects: the renovation of 1st Presbyterian at 64th and Woodlawn, and Central City Housing Ventures.

We have learned, or perhaps relearned, two important lessons:

1. For churches at least, mission is not something you do after have taken care of everything else. Mission is why we exist. And while not every religious organization can afford elaborate community service centers, each can serve its neighbors. That activity, that mission, is at the heart of the matter and is a source of strength and hope for the future.

2. And we have learned that mortar does matter. We know, of course, that the church is people, not the building. But we will not say that lightly again.

We have relearned the lesson to which you have devoted yourselves, that buildings are not only important parts of their communities -- "Amazing Spaces" without which our communities would be immeasurably poorer -- they are also part of the way we say who we are, and what we believe, and what we are all about.

<u>There are</u> sermons in stories, Mr. Shakespeare observed ... and in bricks and mortar. Thank you very much for helping all of us remember that important truth.